



SEQUOIA & KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARKS

SEQUOIA NATIONAL FOREST / GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MONUMENT

SPRING 2005 GUIDE



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Getting away from it all

Friends suggest that you drive miles from civilization to an isolated spot out in the woods. They swear you'll sleep contentedly with nothing but a zipper and a slip of nylon between you and the big bad world. They're not crazy — it's true! It's a getaway to your National Parks.

Are ancient trees, looming mountains, and dancing rivers casting a spell over otherwise sensible humans? Perhaps. Under the open sky, we feel transported to a simpler time before alarm systems and the evening newscast. We turn to national parks to "get away from it all." And it works. In addition to the beauties of nature, there is relatively little crime here.

However, confrontations with society's negative aspects can break the spell. A smashed stalactite in Crystal Cave or a gang symbol carved into a fallen sequoia chip away at our sense of security.

Crimes cost us financially, as well. Each year, park maintenance spends thousands of dollars repairing such vandalism. Just last year, for example, the park spent over \$19,000 on new cave gates to prevent destruction of delicate, age-old stone formations.

One of the single most destructive crimes here is illegal marijuana cultivation. Growers seek remote areas hidden under oak and manzanita bushes at lower elevations in the park, below where giant sequoias grow. They tear up native plants, steal water from streams, dump hundreds of pounds of fertilizer and insecticides, poach wildlife, and abandon trash and sewage.



Taking a break from excavating trash in a once-pristine forest, a volunteer contemplates the insult to the land left by marijuana growers. @NPS Photo by B. Meadows

In this park alone, rangers pulled out 44,000 marijuana plants last year. They removed some six miles of irrigation line and restored acres of damaged terrain, although the landscape is forever changed. Every year operations like these cost us all millions, money that could go to much better uses.

Visitors pay another price — loss of freedom. To reduce criminals' access to these areas, there is increasing regulation of our wild places. For example, a new gate at the park boundary on Mineral King Road now blocks easy access by marijuana growers from fall through spring. It also means, however, that visitors need to get a free permit before they can go past it during those seasons.

Hope, however, is not lost. Park officials and visitors alike are fighting back. Tips received through a toll-free hotline, 1-888-NPS-CRIME, have been instrumental in preventing vandalism. Volunteers have spent hundreds of hours restoring marijuana sites and damaged caves, among other projects. People are keeping their parks safe.

Even during a brief visit you can help to maintain security and good will in your national parks. Contact a ranger if you see a problem.

Slow down to protect wildlife and people. Be patient with unexpected weather or road conditions. A kind word to a fellow visitor or picking up litter improves the experience for you and the 1.5 million other folks who come every year — just to get away from it all.

-Melanie Rawlins